

EXHIBIT L

POLITICS

DOJ sues Washington state over 'anti-Catholic' legislation

The DOJ claimed a law mandating clergy to report abuse breaches Catholics' religious freedom.



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OLYMPIA, Wash. — The Justice Department (DOJ) filed a lawsuit against Washington state [over a new law](#) that it called "anti-Catholic."

Senate Bill 5375 was passed in the most recent state legislative session and signed by Gov. Bob Ferguson in May. It added "members of the clergy" to a list of professionals who are required to report child abuse or neglect when they have reasonable cause to believe that it occurred, no matter the scenario in which they obtain that information.

In a release, the DOJ said the bill "violates the free exercise of religion for all Catholics, and requires Catholic priests to violate the confidentiality seal of Confession." The DOJ announced in May it would investigate the law over what it said were First Amendment violations.

"Laws that explicitly target religious practices such as the Sacrament of Confession in the Catholic Church have no place in our society," said Harmeet K. Dhillon, the Justice

Department's Civil Rights Division assistant attorney general. "Senate Bill 5375 unconstitutionally forces Catholic priests in Washington to choose between their obligations to the Catholic Church and their penitents or face criminal consequences, while treating the priest-penitent privilege differently than other well-settled privileges. The Justice Department will not sit idly by when States mount attacks on the free exercise of religion."

DOJ said it is intervening in Etienne v. Ferguson, a [lawsuit filed](#) by Catholic bishops in Washington state who filed a lawsuit over the new law in May. In a May [sit-down interview](#) with KING 5's Joyce Taylor, Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle said priests have told him they would go to prison before revealing information given during confession.

"We want our people to continue to have trust and confidence in the sacrament of reconciliation, better known as confession, that they can trust that when they come to receive the sacrament, that that's going to be a confidential communication," Etienne said. "Our church law, Canon Law, also says that if a priest violates that seal, he's automatically excommunicated from the church."

"Our priests have told me, 'Archbishop, I'll go to prison before I allow the state to coerce any such information from me,' and I think all of our priests feel that way," Etienne said.



Gov. Ferguson said of the lawsuit in May: "I'm disappointed my Church is filing a federal lawsuit to protect individuals who abuse kids."

Experts say the law, while well-intentioned, perhaps goes too far in its infringement on religious freedoms.

"I think the record is clear that the Catholic Church, for quite some time, failed to protect children," Seattle University law professors Deirdre Bowen said, acknowledging the long history of abuse scandals within the Church.

But even among those pushing for stronger child protection laws, opinions differ on how far the state should go.

"The question of whether the state needs to step in and compel the Catholic Church to allow their priests to breach confidentiality and not be excommunicated is a very extreme law," Bowen said. "I'm not sure that we necessarily have to go that far."

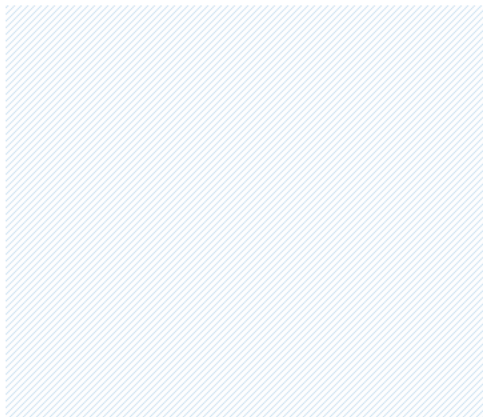
The proposal would make priests mandatory reporters in all contexts — even when abuse is disclosed during confession. That has triggered a constitutional debate over religious freedom.

"That priest is attempting to practice his religion," Bowen added. "In practicing his religion and becoming a priest, he is obligated to keep confidential the things that he hears during confession, and if he doesn't, he risks excommunication from the Church."

Previously, these types of confessions were considered confidential under state law, which recognizes clergy-penitent privilege. Similar to attorney-client privilege or spousal privilege, this means a priest or minister cannot be called to testify under oath about what someone told them in confession. While attorney-client privilege and spousal privilege will still be recognized as exemptions to mandatory reporting, clergy-penitent privilege will no longer be.

The bill's prime sponsor, state Sen. Noel Frame, said the bill was about not being complicit in institutional cover-ups of physical and sexual abuse of children. Frame cited a years-long cover-

up of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's Witness community in Washington state as the catalyst for this legislation.



At a January hearing, Frame said the bill "fell apart" during the 2024 session, but the revelation that three separate archdioceses of the Catholic church were being investigated for covering up abuse allegations in Washington prompted her to bring it forward again.

"Quite frankly, that made it hard for me to stomach any argument about religious freedom being more important than preventing the abuse, including the sexual abuse of children," Frame said in January. "I really wonder about all the children who have been abused and neglected and have gone unprotected by the adults in their lives because we didn't have a mandated reporter law and that we continue to try to protect this in the name of religious freedom."

KING 5 got a statement Monday afternoon from Sen. Frame's office about the lawsuit.

"We must take every step possible to make sure kids are safe. That's why I championed this bill and that's why it passed with bipartisan support. This law brings us in line with the majority of other states that require clergy to be mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect. We also join six other states – including Texas and Oklahoma – that require the reporting of abuse learned during penitential communication, including confession."

"Whether you're from a red state or a blue state, keeping kids safe from abuse should be a non-partisan issue."

KING 5's Adel Toay contributed to this report.

